

ON YOUR MARKS: ACCENTUATING
ELOQUENCE (SET IN TYPE, NOT IN STONE)

VICTORIA LARKIN

Strictly speaking, when it comes to punctuation you probably don't need anything but commas and periods.

With some dexterity you could probably even skip the commas.

Long ago one was lucky to have spaces between phrases.

Latin inscriptions in what was known as scriptio continua didn't even have spaces between words

Way back when, most anything written down was meant to be read aloud. Texts were occasionally marked with symbols signaling various pause lengths to an orator.

By the 4th Century CE, in response to a decline in literacy, professional scholars and educated readers began to punctuate their own copies of older Latin texts in order to clarify and maintain the integrity of meaning for future generations. Manuscripts "pointed" by these elite readers became known as *codices distincti*. There were not very many of them.

Once the Bible was translated into Latin, things really got going. Matters of interpretation became paramount: meaning hinged on where you paused. Unthinking scribes could mess up everything: was God the Word, or was the Word with God? (See Augustine of Hippo, *On Christian Doctrine, Book III*.) Augustine, that vigilant church Father, insisted that punctuation keep meaning in line with Orthodox Church Doctrine; anything else was considered "heretical pointing."

Irish scribes, working with Latin as a second language, introduced many innovations of punctuation, including spaces between words, and symbols (some based on ancient examples) to delineate breaks in grammatical structure. As book learning increased, so did jobs for scribes. The more scribes inscribed, the more skilled they became. They created new symbols for more subtle effects. For a few centuries, different scribes in different regions did different things, and the general conversation about when and how to point flourished.

What would you make of this, without punctuation:

Georgie my brother replied to his wife we are in debt

Georgie, my brother, replied: To his wife we are in debt.

Georgie, my brother replied, to his wife we are in debt.

Georgie, my brother, replied to his wife: We are in debt.

Georgie, my brother replied to his wife, we are in debt.

Then, a new invention happened: in the 15th Century, printing by type was created, and punctuation marks as we know them today took shape and firmly established their functions. Moveable type ensured consistent reproduction of older and newly created symbols. As printed texts traveled wider and farther than manuscripts, this consistency inspired more standardized use; beginning writers modeled their punctuation on what they read, and so passed on what they'd absorbed.

As with kings, scribes, philosophers, and fashions, punctuation changes with the times. By the 1800s, novelists were punctuation happy! Novels were overfull of every punctuation mark available! Like Victorian bric-a-brac, there wasn't a spot left unadorned: layers upon layers of commas;—even dashes following semicolons!

Modernism then demanded a break from centuries-old forms. Like women's clothing, punctuation was minimized and streamlined. Some writers eschewed anything but the period. Wouldn't dream of commas. Commas only slow a reader down. Sentences punctuated with periods are firm. They are decisive. Thought is complete. Rows of sentences marked by periods march ahead. There shall be no such frippery as commas. We certainly won't entertain any coloned species. And let's not even mention the vagary of ellipses...oops...

Since at least the 4th Century, there have been many scholars, scribes, philosophers, grammarians, and authors who've written discourses about punctuation. One ongoing point of contention has been whether writing is meant to re-present the spoken word, and is therefore rhetorical; or whether it is meant to adhere to an internal set of syntactical rules, mostly based on Latin construction. Some have been emphatic that each writer has their own expression, and punctuation should be used to accentuate individual eloquence. Others have been more concerned with punctuating according to semantic units, seeking a prescribed grammar, a consensus of correctness based on logic: rules.

Most often, writing is not exactly re-producing speech. Writing does not fly out of the mouth like the spent arrow; it can be considered and altered before it goes out into the world. Writing is crafted voice, and punctuation is part of that craft.

Each punctuation mark becomes akin to a look, a gesture, a breath—like a stage direction in tone:

He leaned to the side and muttered to his table mate: "...—and that was no joke!"

She explained to her cousin: "...; the strawberries are ripe!"

He weighed their silence before continuing: "...: three heads in each jar."

Writers use punctuation to give cadence to their text, according to their own taste and intent, not the rules. Trying to remember the rules can detract from, and is often a turn off to the craft of writing: If someone is busy trying to remember all the rules before they can use a comma, what happens to creativity?

The first step is to know your own writing. The next is to know your punctuation.

A good way to get to know the rhythms of your writing—also a good way to proofread your own work—is to read your writing out loud, noting where you pause, and noting the kind of pause you want.

Not all pauses are equal.

You could say there's a sort of hierarchy of punctuation, representing different degrees of pauses, going from no pause at all (no mark), to a brief minimal pause (,), to a medium pause (;), to a major pause (:), to a full stop(.).

Commas are the most versatile of punctuation marks, and can probably cover most pausical needs.

Where a period signifies a full stop, implying completion of an idea or a sentence, a comma is a brief pause inside of that idea or sentence.

Commas perform many subtle and distinct tasks.

They emphasize (or subordinate):

"I live a quiet life, without my family, in New Hampshire."

They separate and add:

Sharon, her two children, and the dogs, all came with us.

They shift tone:

Just how, young man, do you intend to pay for that window?

And they help us know what is and isn't connected:

My parents, Arthur, and Todd were at the table that night.

A medium pause maintains a connection between separate ideas or sentences. For this a semicolon can be used:

I never meant to come here; the car stalled.

Semicolons can also set off comparisons:

What is there between public and private; sacred and profane; wet and dry?

and are useful for lists with commas inside:

Three items were in the drawer: a silver pistol, with J.S. engraved on the handle; a packet of letters; and a small box, locked, with no key in sight.

Colons separate more definitively than semicolons, and they have an anticipatory quality. Most often used before lists (and examples), they can also come between sentences, suggesting that what follows directly elucidates what preceded:

Mother and Father were happy: Baby had a home.

Punctuation rules are sometimes grounded in tone.

Here are two complete sentences joined by a conjunction and the required comma:

Harry and his dog went for a walk, but they never arrived at the shore.

Without the conjunction, the rule states that you must use either a semicolon or a period:

Harry and his dog went for a walk; they never arrived at the shore.

Harry and his dog went for a walk. They never arrived at the shore.

Note how each choice changes the emphasis and connection of the second sentence.

Does one seem more ominous than another? Our choices set the moods.

Most punctuation is a matter of style, and taste. For instance, using dashes, parenthesis, or commas for separating asides:

Knowing my marks—like knowing my words—allows me to shape and highlight the world of my text.

Knowing my marks (like knowing my words) allows me to shape and highlight the world of my text.

Knowing my marks, like knowing my words, allows me to shape and highlight the world of my text.

As authors of our own texts, it is up to us to know what we mean, how we want the mind of the reader to hear us, and how to use punctuation to convey our music to their eyes. If we were to write without any punctuation at all, surely our messages would get muddled. Mindful use of punctuation allows us to ensure clarity, and create subtle effects, in all kinds of our writing.

There are lots of fun books, believe it or not, about punctuation. Some were written in England, and there are different rules in England (some of which I prefer). Some are full of rules, and some are full of amusing examples illustrating creative use. Some people prefer the simplicity of rules, but rebellious folks like you and me prefer to do as we please, “within reason” (reason being: have one).

I’ll leave you with a short list of the books I’ve gotten into, both for style and rules, and a reminder that you can always come to the Grammar Garden (in the Writing Center) to Play with Punctuation. ‘Til then!

SUGGESTED READING LIST

Dawkins, John. “Rethinking Punctuation.” ERIC ED 340 048. 1992.

Dawkins, John. “Teaching Punctuation as a Rhetorical Tool.” CCC 46.4 (1995): 533-548.

Parkes, M.B. *Pause and Effect: An Introduction to the History of Punctuation in the West*. Berkley: University of California Press, 1993.

Truss, Lynne. *Eats, Shoots & Leaves*. New York: Gotham Books, 2003.

Kolln, Martha. *Rhetorical Grammar*. Upper Saddle River, NJ: Pearson Education, 2003.

Strunk, William and E.B. White. *The Elements of Style*. New York: Longman, 2000.

Hacker, Diane. *A Writer’s Reference*. New York: St. Martin’s Press, 1999.

Gordon, Karen Elizabeth. *The New Well-Tempered Sentence: A Punctuation Handbook for the Innocent, the Eager, and the Doomed*. New York: First Mariner Books, 2003.

Rozakis, Laurie. *Comma Sutra*. Avon, MA: Adams Media, 2005.

[Note: As of 2013, the Grammar Garden is no longer a program of the Writing Center.]